

Earth Art, Consciousness and The Thing Itself

The constellations of Earth art and consciousness research are related. How, though? **Tracey Warr** maps the terrain.

'The ultimate passion of the Western mind over two thousand five hundred years has been to understand the ground of its own being.'
Max Velmans, *Understanding Consciousness*

Debates on the philosophy and science of consciousness are currently being fuelled by research in sleep, artificial intelligence, quantum theory, phenomenology and other areas of neuroscience, cognitive science, psychology and the biosciences. Whilst our subjective experience confirms the existence of consciousness (our own at least), and intuitively we know that it is central to human life, science is currently unable to explain what it is, how it works and what its functions are. Can some of the practice of Earth and body artists over the last 50 years contribute to our understanding of consciousness?

There is a tangle of muddled terms and theories surrounding the word 'consciousness.' The words mind, soul, knowledge, self-knowledge, self, are all often used interchangeably with the term consciousness. None of these words accurately or comprehensively coincide with the notion of consciousness that is explored here. 'Being' is the word that comes closest to a definition of consciousness I want to consider.

One common definition of consciousness is to make a distinction between being conscious or wakeful, and unconscious. But this leaves out a whole range of experiences which we are conscious of. We have visual and auditory experiences in dreams for instance. So a better definition here, and one used by Velmans,¹ is that consciousness is what we are conscious of – so then this includes thoughts, feelings, images, dreams, body sensations and sensory experiences.² Unfortunately this second definition excludes preconscious and



Robert Smithson: 'Spiral Jetty', Utah 1970

unconscious brain and body activities. It excludes autonomic bodily functions – heart beat, blood flow, vasomotor activity, pupil dilation – the neural, biochemical and bioelectrical activities carried out by our bodies of which we are unaware and to which we have no conscious access. Our bodies are twitching with electrical and chemical reactions, crawling with invisible quantum life, and animated by the motivations of genes, cells, DNA, hormones and enzymes.